

CAVALCADE OF COUNTIES: Keepers of the Heritage

'Local' Historians Supply a Wealth of Material for 'Encyclopedia Jerseyana'

BY JOHN T. CUNNINGHAM

SOMETIMES Hiram E. Deats of Flemington Junction wonders if maybe he hasn't spread himself too thin, studying the whole of Hunterdon County instead of specializing in a smaller area surrounding the farm where he has lived most of his 83 years. One thing he knows for sure:

"The world's too big to spread all over; I'm sticking to Hunterdon!"

Let it be said, incidentally, that Mr. Deats talks much of the time with tongue-in-cheek ("a little humor always helps"), but he has good reason for being glad he has stuck to Hunterdon. He knows, as do all "local" historians, that by studying one's own back yard a person can get a good notion of what's going on the world over.

Mr. Deats might with justice be called "Mr. Local History" in New Jersey, because he typifies the countless numbers of people of all ages and occupations who love their towns, their counties and their state. It takes some digging

to know New Jersey, but with some one like Mr. Deats to wield the pick, the going is easier.

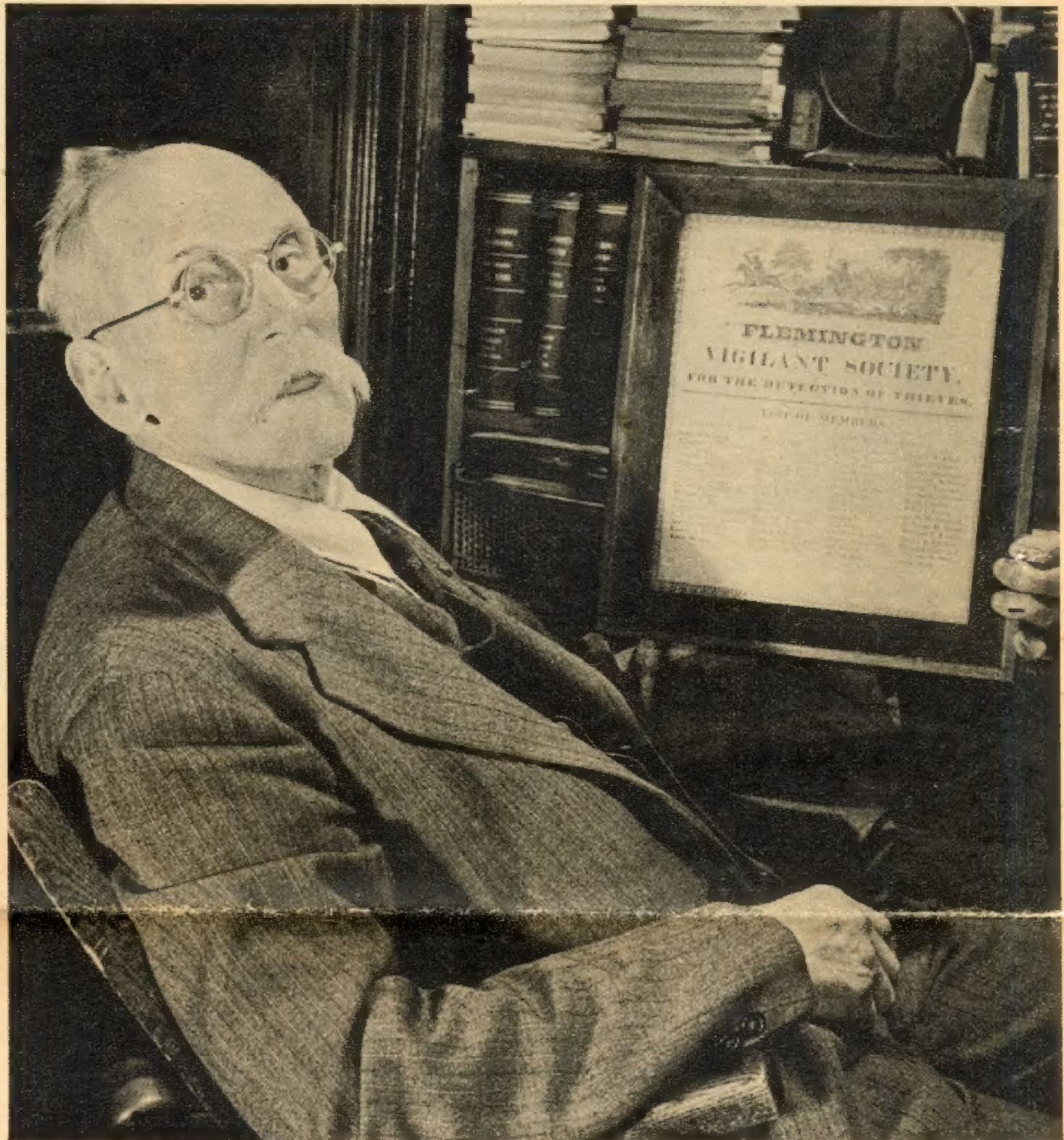
In all fairness, before handing a local historian the pick, the digger might well do a bit of mining himself—although there are rich nuggets to be picked right off the surface, at that.

TAKE, for example, the the state's Department of Conservation and Economic Development in Trenton, where a diligent staff keeps plugging the state. Any one can get a good long start toward knowing New Jersey merely by dropping a postcard to the department and asking for two pamphlets: "New Jersey's State Forests, Parks and Historic Sites" and "Know New Jersey."

Those should be enough to provoke at least some picnicking and possibly some further picking, and the department will dig right along with you. They'll give information about

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New Jersey is fortunate in the number of men and women who, as professionals or amateur hobbyists, have delved deeply into the regional history of their state. Some of these authorities, on whom Mr. Cunningham drew for much of the material in The News' "Cavalcade of Counties" series, are presented in this concluding article on the subject.



"Mr. Local History," otherwise Hiram E. Deats of Flemington Junction, with a memento of Jersey of the 1800's—roster of a farmers' protective association.



Historic marker in Washington Park attracts Miss Miriam Studley of Newark Public Library and Dr. Hubert P. Schmidt of Newark Rutgers.



Mrs. Maude Greene and Alexander Wall of the New Jersey Historical Society with their valuable Gilbert Stuart portrait of Aaron Burr.



Professor James E. Downes, who is conducting a "full-blown" course in Jersey history at Newark State Teachers' College, traces old Indian trails for the benefit of Freshman Betty Stetts of Elizabeth.



Old Barracks in Trenton, built in 1758 for British troops, forms the backdrop for Mrs. Arlene R. Sayre of the Department of Conservation and Economic Development, and Roger McDonough, state librarian.

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agriculture and industries—past, present and (above all) future; they'll welcome you at any of the state forests, parks or historic houses, they'll answer specific questions on anything dealing with Jersey.

By the time a digger gets to the "specific" stage, he will have dropped down to Trenton—and, if he's lucky, the door on which he has knocked is 431 State House Annex, where Mrs. Arlene R. Sayre patiently and infectiously dispenses her own intimate knowledge of the state. She is only one of the many people in the department, of course, but she's a good example of a hard-working staff.

IOWA-BORN, Mrs. Sayre had her first glimpse of the Atlantic Ocean when she came east to study at New Jersey College for Women. Seeing the Atlantic for the first time as an adult, she hastens to point out, "is an experience beyond the imagination of those who learned to creep on sandy beaches and cut their teeth on clam shells."

Mrs. Sayre credits Fred W. Jackson in the information office of the Department of Agriculture with pointing out to her that many "natives" in New Jersey don't appreciate their state (a fact that becomes all too obvious to any one who knows New Jersey first hand).

She's a lucky person at that, is Mrs. Sayre—since "I'm doing for a living what I would in any case, learning about New Jersey." Off hours, she keeps learning, with particular emphasis on the pine bar-

rens, early religious movements, Jersey in the Civil War, shipwrecks and "half a dozen more things." She gives adult courses in Jersey, past and present, and acts as a one-woman Chamber of Commerce for visiting out-of-state relatives.

MAYBE you'll never get to the "specific" stage, but do invest in a postcard to the Department of Conservation and Economic Development, anyway. It's the best bargain of its sort since Charles Atlas started daring skinny weaklings to risk a 3-cent stamp.

It helps when approaching any of the local keepers of the heritage if some of the language is known. That seems only fair, just as any one asking Joe DiMaggio to explain baseball might reasonably be expected to know the difference between a hit and an error.

That can—and should—lead a person to a library. Let it be admitted right off the bat that there are some local libraries where it is much easier to obtain information on Mesopotamia than on the local town. There are librarians working hard to overcome that, fortunately, led by State Librarian Roger McDonough, who brings a lively interest in his own state to the job (and that's just as important as the Dewey decimal system).

RIGHT now Mr. McDonough is microfilming state papers, a task complicated by the fact

that so many documents which belong in Trenton are scattered elsewhere—many of them out-of-state. Jersey's somewhat-less-than-terrific official interest in its own heritage has let valuable papers disappear from the files.

Mr. McDonough is a strong advocate of more widespread teaching of state and local history in New Jersey schools and he believes historical societies must avoid a "snobbish approach" to history. He has said in talks to historical groups that "the story of what successive waves of immigrants have done in and for New Jersey is just as much history as the recital of what Gen. Washington and his men did at Trenton and Princeton."

It isn't likely that the average person will get to see Mr. McDonough at the State Library at Trenton, since it's much more logical to step into the local library and ask:

"What can you tell me about New Jersey?"

THAT'S a loaded question, which really can't be answered by putting 35 books in front of the questioner. A mere pile of tomes can drive him back to his television set (and his annual two-weeks' trip to New England).

Rather, it takes the skill of a librarian like Miss Miriam Studley to keep the neophyte on the Jersey trail. She has the knack of providing exactly the right thing at the right time—which is why so many high school and college

students find their way to Miss Studley's New Jersey room on the third floor in Newark Public Library.

The very room impresses. There is no collection of Jerseyana like it in the state for completeness and accessibility. Miss Studley insists modestly that she has had little to do with it—"this dates back to John Cotton Dana, you know, and there has been a continuity of interest," she declares.

THAT'S true, but as any visitor learns, it's the vibrant spirit of Miss Studley and the eager helpfulness of Mrs. Miriam Ball, her associate, which make the Newark Library collection worthwhile.

Miss Studley is an interesting person in herself. Born in China, she was brought up in the Philippine Islands and crossed the Pacific Ocean five times before she settled permanently in the United States at age 16. She comes by her Jersey interest honestly, however—her missionary father was graduated from Rutgers and her mother came from Rutherford.

Interest in New Jersey is increasing, Miss Studley finds. "There is a general attempt to make people more aware of their own communities," she points out. "People in education and public life are channeling interest into what's close at hand."

Happily for coming generations there appears to be a rising "Know New Jersey" spirit

in the state's teachers' colleges. James E. Downes, professor at Newark Teachers College, indirectly keeps Miss Studley busy by directing teachers to the library's "New Jersey Room." Mr. Downes is trying for the first time this year a "full-blown" course in Jersey history.

Do his students like it? "They eat it up," says Mr. Downes. "It's something new to them. They don't know much about their own state—they may even be a little ashamed of New Jersey."

STUDENTS who have found their interest in their own back yards heightened by Miss Studley's patient leadership, often find their way to the New Jersey Historical Society at 230 Broadway, Newark, to dig into the fascinating mass of first-hand material available there.

The historical society would like beginners to come in, too, of course—and have in the last two years put a very genuine "welcome" mat by the front door. Founded in 1845, the New Jersey Historical Society always should have been the leader in state historical movements—but it wasn't, mainly because the budget just couldn't stand a large enough working force to do much more than keep the vast collections in order.

Through the latter part of those lean years, Mrs. Maud Honeyman Greene struggled to maintain public enthusiasm for the society and its collections. She deserves credit for keeping the society useful—and many a lover of New Jersey counts Mrs. Greene as a



Dr. Richard P. McCormick (left) and Donald A. Sinclair, both of Rutgers University, are two leading figures in "Know New Jersey" movement.

friend who helped unlock the doors to the state's vivid past.

NOW, however, things are looking up at the New Jersey Historical Society, reflecting a general statewide upsurge in local historical interest. Alexander J. Wall, rounding out two years as director, has brought the professional guidance the society has needed. Membership is up, the society's museum has attractive exhibits and the Railroadians of America have a splendid transportation section on the third floor.

But to any one studying New Jersey, the real treasure at the New Jersey Historical Society is in the vaults. Bound volumes of extremely valuable old newspapers, old diaries, letter, documents, maps and pictures are all on hand to fill in a student's thesis or to intrigue the ordinary everyday person digging just out of curiosity.

Much of the society's rekindled flame is due to the initiative and personality of Dr. Richard P. McCormick, Rutgers University history professor. Dr. McCormick sought a specialty after he received his Ph. D. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1945. He realized New Jersey was wide open for a study of its own beginnings and development—so he started at Rutgers the state's first full-credit course in New Jersey history.

AS his interest and knowledge of New Jersey grew, Dr. McCormick's zeal increased. About five years ago he started a movement to get the

state's historical societies working in unison. The results have been significant: Two conferences of historians on the Rutgers University campus moved Dr. McCormick into the forefront of state historians and in 1950 he was elected president of the New Jersey Historical Society.

One of the most notable indications of a more streamlined approach at the New Jersey Historical Society has been the Quarterly, which has taken on a new look under the editorship of Donald A. Sinclair, society trustee and curator of special collections at Rutgers University.

SINCLAIR is another one of those out-of-state Jersey lovers, although he moved from Kansas to New Jersey as a boy. Interestingly enough, his teen-age research turned up the fact that his ancestors in the Banta family had become residents of Bergen County soon after 1659. They eventually moved westward to Kentucky, then across the Mississippi River.

His work in the library gives Mr. Sinclair the opportunity to continue his research, but he studies the state for an avocation, too. As far as the Quarterly is concerned, Mr. Sinclair is trying to steer it somewhere "between an extreme popularization and an extreme scholarly approach." Some critics contend the magazine still retains traces of the dreaded "foot and note disease," but it's considerably livelier than many past issues.

Just to keep the record straight, incidentally, along

with the "new blood" on the historical society's board of trustees, there is a chap named Deats—Hiram E. Deats of Flemington Junction, now rounding out 45 years as a trustee and '63 years as a society member.

As long as we're back on the subject of Mr. Deats, and just past talking about historical writing, this is a good time to bring up Dr. Hubert P. Schmidt, author and professor of history at Newark Colleges of Rutgers, who has a close tie-in with Hunterdon's Mr. Deats.

Some 30 years ago Mr. Deats began thinking about an agricultural history of Hunterdon County, but nothing concrete was done until the early 1940s, when Hubert Schmidt was chosen to write the history. Mr. Deats's notes and his keen mind were at Dr. Schmidt's disposal for many weeks. The result was "Rural Hunterdon," published in 1945 by Rutgers University Press.

SINCE then Dr. Schmidt has edited into 20th Century form the charming "Story of an Old Farm," which Andrew J. Mellick published in 1889. Issued by Rutgers Press in 1948 as "Lesser Crossroads," the book contains an intriguing (if at time disjointed) collection of anecdotes and historical happenings centered more or less in Somerset County.

Mr. Deats will tell you with justifiable pride that while he has only written one book (an index of marriages in Hunterdon County from 1795-1876) his name has appeared in the prefaces of dozens of others.

The words: "And I wish to give special credit to Hiram E. Deats . . ." have probably appeared in more prefaces than for any other living Jerseyman, although the name Nathaniel R. Ewan of Burlington County would run it a close second.

MR. EWAN has been a prolific writer himself through the last 30 years, and still does "a column or so for The Mount Holly Herald about once a month." His absorbing interest has long been the story of the iron industry in New Jersey, and in that connection he collaborated with the late Charles A. Boyer in preparing the very useful "Early Forges and Furnaces of New Jersey." Mr. Ewan has visited the site of every known iron works in New Jersey and unquestionably has the state's most complete collection of old iron industry photographs.

Photography led Mr. Ewan to the study of New Jersey. He started photographing the early houses in Burlington County and did the job so thoroughly that the Library of Congress asked him to file his negatives there. Later he spent four years with the Library of Congress photographing 18th Century houses throughout the state.

Make no mistake about it, Mr. Ewan knows Jersey, particularly South Jersey. His notes and his writings are an invaluable source of material on the great pine barrens and his countless trips into the pines have made him a staunch defender of the (Continued on Following Page)



Edward Feltus, Monmouth County expert, hunts Revolutionary War relics with mine detector.

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KEEPERS OF THE HERITAGE

(Contin'd from Preceding Page)
much-maligned "Pineys" who live in the great forests.

Mr. Ewan and most other local historians work unceasingly with and for their local historical societies—even if Mr. Deats is inclined to admit wryly: "Like most small societies, we are in what another Jerseyman, Grover Cleveland, called 'a state of innocuous desuetude.'"

THAT can be said for many of the local groups, although there are several outstanding exceptions. One of these is the Monmouth County Historical Association at Freehold, where friendly, publicity-minded Ed Feltus is director.

A comparative newcomer to Monmouth County (where roots of several families go down some 300 years), Mr. Feltus has brought vigor and liveliness to local historical doings. As many as 7,000 visitors now enjoy the association's handsome exhibits and the countryside has gotten used to Ed Feltus and fellow historians hunting for Revolutionary War relics with pick axes, shovels or mine detectors.

Some of the oldest historical societies suffer from lack of vigorous leadership. Their seldom-used libraries and locked-up museums could use

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Robert E. Frederick (left) of Phillipsburg, founder of Warren County Historical and Genealogical Society, and Nathaniel Ewan of Burlington, an expert with typewriter and camera on Jersey iron, the Pine Barrens and 18th Century houses.



an Ed Feltus or a leader like Robert E. Frederick, Phillipsburg attorney, who helped found the Warren County Historical and Genealogical Society about four years ago. The Warren County group is probably the state's newest society, whose beginnings reflect the swelling historical enthusiasm throughout the state. Mr. Frederick's reason for the association is direct: "We thought it would be a good idea to know something about the county."

As of now the mine detectors have not turned up the exact relics Mr. Feltus is looking for—but they have turned up some splendid notices in the newspapers (and who can say that history is harmed because it's pepped up a bit?).

Actually, of course, New Jersey can best be appreciated by getting out and exploring it. Many of the local historical societies know that and sponsor trips to interesting nearby points or conduct tours through old houses in their areas. Any one seeking to get out by himself to look at old houses and museums would do well to drop a note to the Department of Conservation and Economic Development (what, again?) and ask for the pamphlet "New Jersey Museums and Historic House Museums."

IT'S impossible to list all local historians of note, since all give freely of their time and knowledge to any one who comes a-knocking. To mention 10 is to slight a hundred more. The surface is merely scratched to say that people like Hiram D. B. Blauvelt of Bergen County, Karl A. Dickinson of Cape May, Meade Landis of Cumberland, Miss

Fannie Taber of Atlantic and Miss Emma V. Duffield of Gloucester are eager to help any one who seeks their assistance.

That's only a start—there must be added the names of Miss Grace Vogt of Morris, Dr. A. L. Johnson of Union, D. Stanton Hammond of Passaic, Harry A. Crispin of Salem, Harvey B. Nelson of Hudson, Jack Lamping of Ocean, Dr. Nathaniel Evans of Somerset and Joseph Valler of Sussex are others who like their counties enough (and most important, know enough about them) to help the person seeking information.

Eventually, if a person keeps at it long enough, he starts buying Jersey books, and it can be an expensive hobby—the kind that has to be explained to the other half of the household by saying that "these old books never go down in value; this is an investment."

Where to start on a Jersey book collection is the question.

LIKE listing local historians, a mere listing of books is of little purpose, particularly since reading the titles gives no more hint of what the books contain than do the colors of their bindings. For a good brief biography consult "Know Your State" (Department of Conservation and Economic Development). For the most comprehensive bibliography available, however, ask your librarian for "New Jersey, Its History, Resources and Life; a Bibliography," published by the Department of Public Instruction in Trenton in 1940.

Well, where will it all get you (if you dig enough)?

It could possibly make you "Mr. Local History," like Hiram E. Deats has become after looking at the Hunterdon County scene since 1876, when his grandmother first started to build up family pride in him. You would see the world develop in terms of your own environment.

EVENTUALLY, the world's headlines would catch up with you, as they did with Mr. Deats in 1935 when Bruno Richard Hauptmann was tried in Flemington for the murder of the infant son of Charles A. Lindbergh. Mr. Deats sat on the Grand Jury which indicted Hauptmann, and throughout the trial reporters sought out Mr. Deats for local color and background information.

He remembers with a broad grin that Joseph Alsop wrote a nice long story about him and called him "the Sage of Flemington." He recalls with a hearty laugh the girl reporter who stopped in, then wrote a story about the "dim and jumbled office of Mr. Deats." "Sage of Flemington" or denizen of a "dim and jumbled office"—Mr. Deats doesn't care.

He has lived long enough to fit everything into place—himself into Hunterdon, Hunterdon into New Jersey and so on. He gets his reward and his pleasure from the youngsters who come in for help on their themes or theses, from the people who come from all over the country to get information on their ancestors.

The simple fact is that, by knowing Hunterdon, Mr. Deats knows the entire country. And, not surprisingly, a good bit of the country knows him, too.